

INTERPRETING VIVEKANANDA
A Citizenship Perspective



SELF-ESTEEM IN DEVELOPMENT

Can you raise the masses? Can you give them back their lost individuality without making them lose their innate spiritual nature?

– Swami Vivekananda

Vol. 5, Epistles – 1st Series

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The power of a nation lies in its vast majority. These millions, often unheard, often oppressed, often treated as mere votes and cannon-fodder, represent the hidden, extraordinary strength of a nation.

How are these millions to be raised? This is the question Swami Vivekananda answers in this quote.

1. One approach is through food or economic security.
2. A second approach is through political and social freedom.
3. A third approach is through access to work, access to medical and other social resources, access to the larger society in which they live.
4. A fourth approach is through peace and stability – and the absence of war, strife, and constant threat to one's life and property.

Philosophers, political and social leaders, intellectuals have argued for ages on which comes first – food? freedom? access to resources? stability? Or some other basis for raising the masses?

Swami Vivekananda transcends all these approaches – though time and again he emphasizes the importance and value of each of these approaches – and focuses on '*the lost individuality*' of the masses as the one thing necessary to raise them up again.

What does 'individuality' mean?

In contemporary language, we would call it self-esteem, or self-respect, but what it really means is the Indian term 'atmasraddha' – faith in oneself.

To Swamiji, 'atmasraddha' is the lever through which the millions in India can be raised.

When an individual develops 'faith in oneself', he/ she views oneself as valid, significant, a single unit of 'free choice', an individual capable of creating one's own destiny.

This atmasraddha gives the individual power, energy, the will to work, the capacity to receive and enjoy freedom, the desire to escape any form of beggary or dependence, and become capable of using whatever resources are available and bettering one's state of living.

Without atmasraddha

- a person who receives food will become a slave to the provider of food,
- the person will be incapable of receiving, retaining and valuing the freedom he/ she has received – political or otherwise,
- the person will not make the necessary effort to access and utilize the resources & infrastructure made available by society.

Without *atmasraddha*, the person will not benefit from help, and will instead become a burden on the help-giver.

Thus, *atmasraddha* is the foundation, the basis on which all forms of help will bear fruit.

Seen another way, even if we feed, clothe, house, and give knowledge and freedom to the masses – we will not benefit them on a sustainable basis.

On the other hand, when we give them '*atmasraddha*', we give them the power to raise themselves with the help of the resources they receive in the form of aid, and support and become, in the longer run, productive and effective units of society, capable of contributing to others who are in the same situation, which they have not escaped from.

Swami Vivekananda adds a further caveat to this. He says that this individuality must not be at the cost of their innate spiritual nature. This means that the '*atmasraddha*' or 'individuality' that is given to the masses should be linked not to their possessions or capabilities, or even membership, but rather to a more fundamental vision of human beings as having infinite potential and intrinsic value.

When individuals respect themselves and others for who they are rather than the possessions and talents, then such respect for others and themselves is sustainable and will have deep roots.

Swami Vivekananda therefore offers us a vision for sustainable development based on 'innate self-respect' and 'respect for others based on their intrinsic right to be respected and valued' rather than on any external criteria.

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